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20 L.A. WEEKLY:

HALF THE STORY is in the eyes. Art director Ewa Wojciak's eyes, bulging and glowing as her hands vibrated gently, three hours after the Wednesday print deadline and three to go. Line-shot operator Ted Schatz's eyes, crackling behind thick lenses as he ignited a 20-foot trail of wax solvent into a wall of flame. Receptionist Jim Smith's eyes, staring blankly as he sang, "Zip-a-dee doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay, my oh my what a wonderful day!" Suzi Gardner's eyes, frozen in fear as she showed teeth through her first day as advertising coordinator. Pasteup artist Kim Jones' eyes, wide, as a flipped-out proofreader dumped a wastebasket full of cigarette butts onto the page of classified ads she was creating. Back-issues manager Don Bolles' eyes, closed as he slept hanging over a stack of papers. Managing editor Phil Tracy's eyes, sagging with dignity, humor and resignation.

But that's the half that can't be told. The other half of the *Weekly*'s 20-year anabasis depends on who you ask. "The *Weekly* we started did not last 20 years," says cofounder Michael Ventura. "This is a celebration of a logo. For me, it's a marriage that went bad — with everything that that entails." Of course, this paper isn't an "it," but people, always new ones, never alike. But the individuals have always had a few attitudes in common. Like the idea that people matter — which remains an extremist position at century's end. Or the proposition that if you go to the edge of the world, you won't fall off. And the idea that there's still a lot to get worked up about.

BEFORE THE BEGINNING

The story began with Jay Levin, an undemonstrative New York reporter with hound-dog eyes and a habit of eating off your plate. His father, a tool-and-die maker and used-car salesman, gave Jay an early taste of journalistic class through his subscription to '50s- '60s *Esquire*. "I think my dad picked it up for the girlie stuff," says Jay, "but it had the best writing in America."

After attending Hofstra and Queens colleges while supporting his wife and kids by working in the post office, Jay lucked into a job as an assistant to the *New York Post*'s financial editor in 1964, at age 21. He soon wangled his way into a slot as counterculture reporter — on his first assignment he met Abbie Hoffman, who would remain a friend until Hoffman's 1989 suicide. By 1974, however, Jay felt creatively stifled. He had quit the *Post* and was freelancing.

"I was lying in bed one day feeling very miserable, trapped, middle of the afternoon, yet another piece to grind out. And an idea came to me out of nowhere — start your own magazine. My next thought was, 'You can't do that, because that's what rich power brokers do.' But I thought some more, and I wrote an outline for something that was a cross between *High Times* and *Newsweek* and *Ramparts*."

But what about the money? Bruce David, editor of *Hustler* at the time, told Jay that Larry Flynt was looking to branch out from his porn empire. Says Jay, "Flynt at that time was being rebirthed by President Carter's sister Ruth Carter Stapleton, hanging out with Dick Gregory, learning about Lenny Bruce and the hip culture and the beat culture and civil rights and the Kennedy assassination and all that stuff."

Flynt fronted some dough, but didn't follow up. Instead, he bought the *L.A. Free Press*, a formerly respected underground paper fallen into disrepute, and tapped Jay to run it. Through Yippie organizer and alternarag publisher Jeff Nightbyrd, Jay knew a few writers who'd collected in Austin, including former New Yorker Michael Ventura, film reviewer and eventual *Weekly* cofounder Ginger Varney, and wild card Big Boy Medlin. With Nightbyrd as managing editor, Stuart Goldman as music writer and Joie Davidow (the fourth of the *Weekly*'s main co-founders), whom he knew through Hoffman, as jill-of-all-trades, Jay had a staff.

Jay got fired 10 weeks into the job, just before the shooting of Flynt pushed the *Free* into oblivion. But he wasn't giving up. He told the staff to stick around.

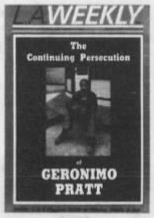
"I got on the phone and started calling everybody I knew," says Jay, and in a few months he'd bagged around $200,000 from an oddball group of investors, including video entrepreneur Joe Benadon, corporate raider/progressive angel Burt Kleiner, actor-producer Michael Douglas and others. Hearing that the *Chicago Reader* was also about to launch a free weekly L.A. publication, he stepped on the gas. The 24-page first issue of the *Weekly* hit the liquor stores and movie theaters five weeks after the inaugural *L.A. Reader* — Thursday, December 7, 1978, Pearl Harbor Day. It carried the date December 8, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.

The *Weekly* holed up in a trashed old two-story house at 5325 Sunset Blvd., near Western Avenue, in a Hollywood war zone a couple of blocks from the Pussycat Theater. The foot traffic was largely prostitutes and transients.

"One of the hookers pulled a knife on one of the staff women and said, 'Get off my block. I do business here. Who's your pimp?'" says Jay. "We'd find condoms in the back yard every day. We called the cops, and they did nothing. So I wrote a letter that everybody on the staff signed, that said if the hookers aren't gone in a week or so, you'll see a huge banner hung out on our building saying, 'Hookers available here, no cops.' The cops showed up the next day and cleared the hookers off."

AN UNFORMED HEART

Joie Davidow, who'd hit the *Free Press* fresh from a job at the *Santa Barbara News and Review*, became the *Weekly*'s corporate vice president and Calendar editor, and soon launched a popular, conversationally toned style column that paralleled the Melrose boom. Before coming to California, she'd trained as an opera singer at New England Conservatory and the University of Pennsylvania, and had done some entrepreneuring: a neon-art gallery, a wearable-art shop, a video-production com-



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